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My Faith Restored

I wake up around 4:30. I clean and try to stretch out the old muscles, but mostly it is time to catch up on paperwork and plan for the new day with the dogs. I walk out to the sound of dogs barking; barking with happiness to see their trainers coming to get them. I watch my Paws for Life brothers put aside whatever is going on in their lives to love their dogs, to take care of them in a way that has touched even this old hardened heart. I smile as I watch men debate (yes, argue!) over the best way to brush and groom their dog. I watch men try to convince the guy who passes out dog treats how their dog "needs" more treats, or toys, for this or that very serious reason, all because they love their dog. I have watched men walk miles with their dog who would much prefer sitting and eating a honeybun or candy bar in the cell! Yes, because they love their dog!

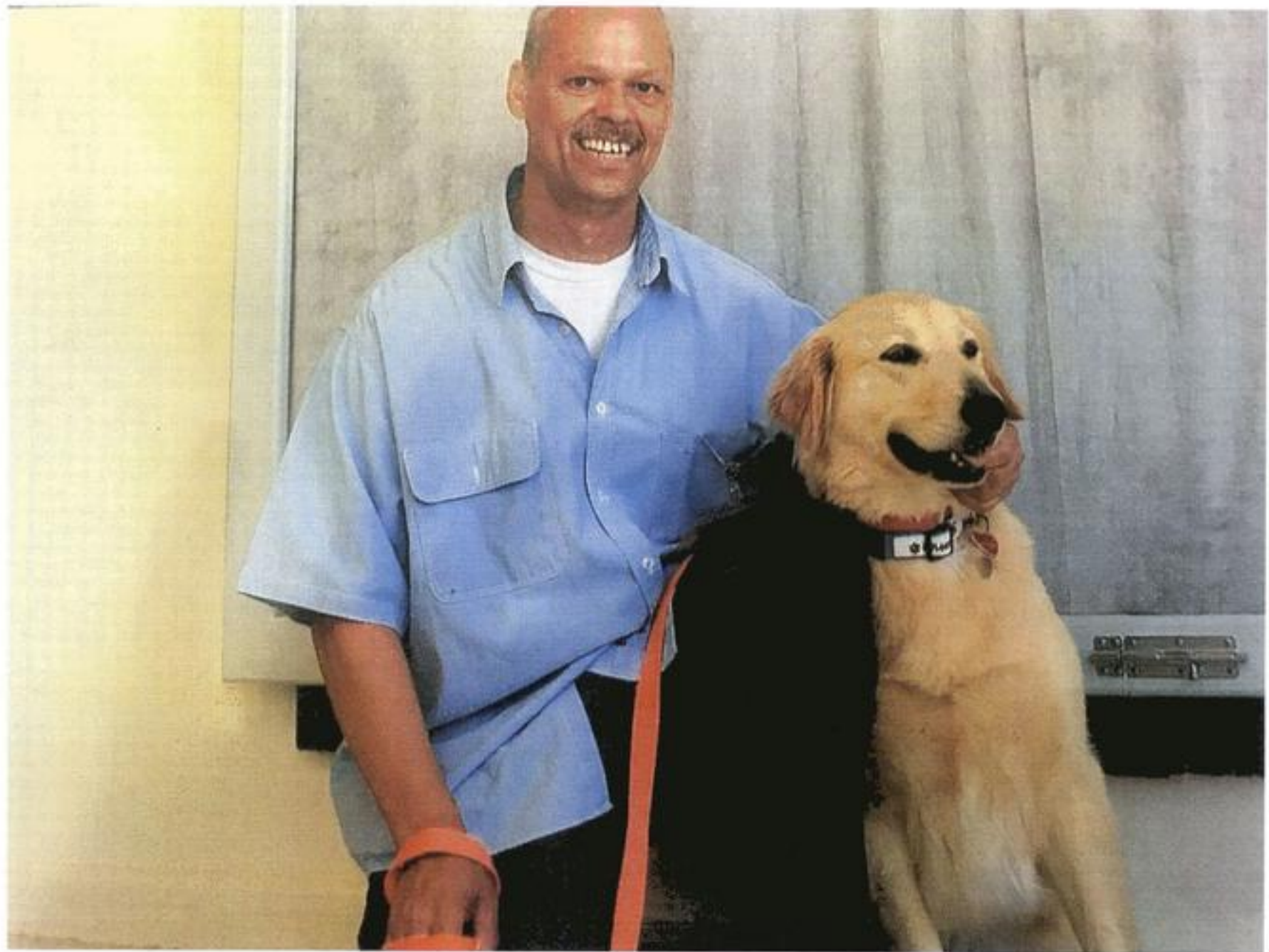
I watch men take care of these amazing animals for hours and hours, for no pay. Most of these men, myself included, have LWOP, so we are not doing this for pay and we are not doing it to get out of prison. We are doing this because we love these dogs so much that we have dedicated ourselves and our time to helping them grow into dogs that will be adopted into families that will love them as much as we do.

Paws For Life K9 Rescue brings dogs to us that are sometimes abused and neglected in ways that I don't even want to mention. These dogs need love and a lot of attention. It is a lot of hard work; many long hours are needed to bring these dogs back to life and to show to them that not everyone in this world will hurt them. I watch not just one or two, but every single one of these men in this program get down on the floor with these dogs and show with their actions that they love their new dogs and earn their trust.

I have watched this, round after round, and each time a group of dogs goes out those gates, a part of me leaves with them. I admit, it is HARD watching them go, but it is their time; it is time for them to be free and go to their new homes, where they will be loved for the rest of their lives. I watch my friends and brothers in the PFL program and I have learned that we have not lost our humanity, it is still there, and we just need a reason to let it out.

After decades in prison, I have finally found something to dedicate myself to, something bigger than myself, that gives back to the community, as well as helping others save the lives of dogs. I have the opportunity to help train dogs that will someday become Service Dogs for Veterans. Nothing affirms the value of life more than these wonderful dogs, whether Service or friend, and the unconditional love they give us in return.

Those of you who have been in prison for many years understand how easy it is to lose your faith in humanity. The days slowly blur into one long fog that never seems to end, full of stupidity and the boring repetition of prison life. Then Paws For Life came along and my eyes opened up to a whole new world. It now has meaning.



WHEN BLACK, BROWN & WHITE EQUALS
"GOLDEN"

I sat down today to write a story about the most amazing Golden Retriever in the world, Stella. A beautiful Golden dog that has been entrusted to us by Paws For Life K9 Rescue, in order to train her for her new family. So, I sat here and thought about my team members, Tobias and Lorenzo. Our team works really well with each other. We work to help Stella become a well trained dog for her new family. Stella is going to be a Service dog for a member of the family that has PTSD. So this makes her training that much more important. This cannot be accomplished by just one individual, it takes a team of hard working and dedicated individuals. It was while I was thinking about "Our Team" that it occurred to me how different we all are. Tobias, my friend and PFL Brother is a kind and loving African American Muslim. Lets be honest, due to current politics, it is not what is considered popular at this moment in time. Then there is my other friend and PFL Brother, Lorenzo, who is Hispanic, has the biggest laugh and heart that a person can have. Once again, due to politics at this moment in time, what people in Washington D.C. would refer to as "one of those Mexicans".

As an Irish American, I can say this with a smile on my face, these men are my Brothers. I love them dearly and we are bonded not only through the Paws For Life program but through these amazing dogs that we are so honored to train. It just happens that "in this moment in time" we are blessed to be training a beautiful "Golden Girl" and we are training her together as BROTHERS! In prison, the madness of "RACE" rules most places and yet we find our way past this madness. For Us, BLACK, BROWN & WHITE = GOLDEN, the amazing and beautiful Golden Girl "Stella"!! PAWS UP!!!

BY: Jack McFadden, Words Uncaged Submission



Stella and I meeting with her family at the Paws For Life Graduation.

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Inmates & Dogs

How Closely We Relate

I was 19 years old in 1983 when I was locked up. I vividly remember the first days when I walked into a maximum security prison. When I was free, when I was just a kid, I thought I was cool. I thought I was tough. I enjoyed being the "Bad Boy." Now I am walking into a building built in the 1800's and I am trying my hardest to look cool, tough and like I am not afraid. I can admit now, I was terrified. I was lost and on the verge of losing it. I was all alone, my family had disowned me, not wanting anything to do with me. The people I had thought were my friends never said goodbye, they just faded away. I was surrounded by men who looked hard and cold and cruel. I had looked too long at an officer and he had asked "What are you looking at?" I have never felt so alone and so afraid in my life. My term of Life Without the Possibility of Parole had started.

32 long years later, I look over at Lucy, the first dog in the Paws For Life (PFL) dog program to be assigned to me. She is sitting by the baby gate that is in the doorway of my cell. She is crying quite loudly, just whining and crying for the family she had grown up with, the only family she had ever known. They had given her up the day before because they had a new baby and couldn't care for her anymore. Lucy was suffering from intense separation anxiety, crying for hours for her former family. Many people asked me how I could put up with all the noise and I would smile and reply, "I empathize—I know exactly how she feels." Some understood what I meant, others did not, but, either way, it was the truth. It is how I felt when I first came to prison; it is how I feel about so many things from my past.

As time went by, I knew I had to take baby steps with her. I wanted to hug her and pet her, but that is not what she needed or wanted. What she required was for someone to be patient and just be there for her. I deeply identified with her. Every day she would lie a bit closer to me, periodically allowing me to lay a hand on her and gently pet her.

Within a few weeks, for better or worse, Lucy had attached herself to me as much as her previous family. I admit, I knew the transferred attachment may be unhealthy, but I also loved being loved so unconditionally! I spent many, many hours with Lucy. We trained, we hung out together, and I loved Lucy as much as she obsessively loved me. A nice woman who works at the prison soon adopted Lucy. She loves and adores Lucy just as we thought and hoped. I was there the day Lucy left. As we said goodbye, it was as if she knew. She licked my face and the tears that streamed down my face. As she started to walk out, she stopped, turned and looked at me with her cute little face. She tilted her head to the side like she would do while listening to me talk as if to say, "It's okay, we'll both be okay."

Date: 2019

The Incredible Power of Dogs

By:

Jack McFadden

I was about eight years old and I was hiding behind a car in the parking area of my Father's Motorcycle Shop. I was transfixed as I watched two huge "bikers", who I knew as Uncle Herby and Uncle Larry, beat a man with pistols. I could hear the man crying and begging for his life. Every time they hit him, he would beg them not to kill him. Those pleas of mercy fell on deaf ears until he eventually stopped screaming and crying. I thought he was dead until I saw a froth of blood coming from his ruined mouth. Uncle Herby and Larry noticed me and came over to me saying, "don't worry little buddy, your safe." I asked them why they had beaten the guy, who at that moment started moaning in pain. We all turned to look at the man when Uncle Larry said, "He didn't pay for his drugs. Remember doing drugs is for dummies." He then gave me some money to go buy some candy at the store. As I turned to leave, Uncle Herby said, "Hey little buddy, don't talk about what you saw, okay?" I nodded my head in agreement. He then said, "If anyone asks you if you saw anything, you tell them that you didn't see anything and then come and let us know who was asking you questions."

Not long after this, I was walking down the alley back to my father's shop after buying some candy at the store. By now, I had heard numerous conversations about stealing from my numerous "Uncles" at the motorcycle shop. I was walking behind the store and a truck was unloading cases into the store. There wasn't anyone around and I could see cases of candy. I picked one up and I ran to my father's shop. As I turned the corner I almost crashed into one of my "Uncles". Looking guilty, with a case of candy bars in my hands, they both smiled at me. One steps forward to see if anyone is chasing me and the other one steps over to a car as he asks me if anyone had seen me take it. I said "no" as he pulls out his keys and opened the trunk of the car and he tells me to hide the candy in there until it is safe. When I complain he looks at me sternly and says, "don't be stupid; think things through. If you walk around eating candy, the people missing the candy will see you and ask questions."

A few months later Uncle Herby picked me up on his motorcycle after school. I was crying and he angrily asked me what was wrong. All 6'5". 300+ pounds of him stands close to me and he kneels next to me and asks me again, "What's wrong little buddy?" I tell him that an older and bigger kid had been hitting me and making fun of me. He asked me who it was and I pointed to the kid. Uncle Herby takes my hand and he leads me over to the boy who is standing with his friends. They all look scared by the time we get there, clearly not expecting a huge scary looking biker to be protecting a little kid, Uncle Herby looks at me and asks, "Which one?" I point to the kid who now looks terrified. Uncle Herby leans towards him and says in a voice full of menace, "If you ever touch him again I will come back and hold you while he beats you with a baseball bat. Do you understand?" As we left them and went to the motorcycle, Uncle Herby looks at me and said, "You don't cry when you lose a fight. You suck it up. If it wasn't a fair fight, go get a bat and beat the shit out of them. Then they will never bother you again."

Another time I am running through the house, when I run into a table and knock over an astray. I exhale when I see that it did not break. I then pick it up and as I place it back on the table. I am hit across the face so hard I see stars. I am startled and I begin to cry. My Mom tells me to stop crying like a little girl. I try to stop crying but I can't. She then says, "Okay Mary, (That is her nickname for me when I cry), go get the belt and bring it to me." I go and get the belt, crying because I know it is going to hurt and that makes me cry even more, which means that I will be beaten even more.

I am in the fourth grade and in the passenger seat of my "Aunt's" car whom I had never met before. She keeps looking at me and she tries to smile. It looks strange, because she doesn't appear very happy. She then pulls over on the side of the freeway and she is crying. I am confused and I do not know what is going on. She then says, "I am not your aunt, I am your real mom, and we are going to spend the week with your brothers." I couldn't help but think of all the times my step mom, who I thought was my real mom, beat me for "lying" or had my father beat me for "lying", My Step-Mother and my Father wouldn't let me see my real Mom again until I was released into her custody at the age of 15.

By the time, I was 17 I was in C.Y.A. (California Youth Authority). It was like being in a crazy house for kids. The violence was nonstop, daily fights that would turn into mini-riots. The "Counselors" were outnumbered 60-70 to one most of the time. It was semi-controlled chaos. I

was released in early 1980's when I was 18. By 1983 I would be arrested and charged with murder, kidnap, and robbery. I would be found guilty of all charges. I blamed everyone but myself. I blamed my Mom, Dad, Step-mom, Lawyer, Judge, District Attorney, Codefendant, and his wife. I blamed everyone; I was always the victim in my mind.

In prison, I am sitting in AD-SEG (Administrative Segregation) and I am freezing cold. I am ranting and raving to myself, while pacing back and forth. It is everyone's fault again. I didn't do what I am locked up in AD-SEG for. I pace back in forth to stay warm and I scream in my mind at the injustice of it all for days on end. Then when I have nothing else left inside me, no more anger, no more excuses, I look at myself, as if I am looking in a mirror. I am no longer a victim. I can no longer blame others for where I am, for the things I have done. I am a gang member dealing drugs in prison. I deserve to be in ADSEG. I may not have planned to murder Mr. Norris Neblit, but I participated in it. I may not have physically killed him but all of my actions say that I am just as guilty. I never once said, "No, Stop." I never once considered calling 911. I participated in the robbery and I kept my part of the money. I did not call the police and I am guilty of murder. I am a murderer and I stole a man's life, a kind and caring man who only wanted to help someone else. I took him from his family, his friends, and his community. For the first time in my life, I felt truly guilty. At times the guilt of what I did was overwhelming and with this new insight, came real remorse for all the things I had been doing all my life. I was disgusted with myself, and my actions. For the first time ever, I understood why the Judge and District Attorney were so hard on me. I deserved it.

It is 2014 and as I walk across the dayroom, I smile as I walk close to this incredibly beautiful dog-named Shelby. She is a beautiful jet-black dog that I am still amazed at seeing here in prison. The five dogs for the Paws for Life (PFL) program had been talked about for months, but I have to admit, I didn't believe it would really happen. The only dogs that I had seen in the last 30 years were police dogs that were looking for drugs and phones! But, here they were and as I walked by I gently petted Shelby. My friend who was assigned to train her said teasingly, "Jack, stop being afraid; sit down and pet her." I wasn't really afraid of the dogs, but for reasons I didn't understand I had felt "almost afraid". Not for fear of being bitten but for reasons I couldn't quite figure out. I smiled at my friend after his comment and I sat down on the floor near Shelby. She climbed right onto my lap, ignoring my discomfort, and started licking my face. My whole

world stopped; everyone else was gone at that moment. I was just a boy again, with a beautiful dog in my lap. I realized that Shelby was actually licking the tears from my face and for the first time since I was a child, I didn't care. I know my friend saw me crying, I know he saw my tears but he "got it", he understood. He smiled, looked the other way and started talking to someone else. For the first time in decades, I felt normal again. I felt alive in a way that I hadn't known was still possible. I realized later, while laying in bed thinking how I had actually cried in front of people and I hadn't cared. I thought about the amazing beautiful feeling I had felt, for the first time, in a long time, I felt normal. Hours went by and then I began to understand what had happened to me. Days later I began to process the amazing experience, I knew that I would do anything I could to be a part of this amazing program.

I am sitting in my cell. The door is open and I have a baby-gate up to keep my very first dog assigned to me inside the cell. She is laying by the door whining. Softly and sometimes loudly for her former family. They had dropped her off with Alex Tonner, the Founder of the Paws for Life K9 Rescue program, just a few short days prior. Her name is Lucy and she is golden and beautiful. Lucy would look at me when I came closer, with a look that said, "Please, just stay away and let me cry for the family that left me." Lucy had been with the same family since she was a puppy, but they now had a child and could not care for her anymore. She came here suffering intense separation anxiety, crying for hours for her former family. Many people would ask me how I could put up with all the noise. I would just smile and reply, "I know how she feels, and she is like me." Some people understood what I meant, others did not, but either way, it was the truth. It is how I felt when I first came to prison; it is how I felt about so many things from my past.

I remember those first days so clearly. I would walk Lucy around the yard to help her acclimate to the new surroundings. Sometimes I would bring her to my cell, lay out a blanket on my bed for her, and then coax her onto it. Usually she would sit or lay by the door and cry. Little by little, I would persuade her to join me. I decided to take baby steps with her. I would sit away from her and allow her to become accustomed to me. Getting steadily closer to her as time went by. She was still on medication for her anxiety, which did little to combat her trauma. I remained patient with her and soon she allowed me to lay a hand on her. I wanted to hug and pet her, but I knew that it was still too early for that. What she required was patience, love, and understanding. I deeply identified with her.

Within a few weeks, for better or worse, Lucy had attached herself to me. I admit that I knew that the transferred attachment was unhealthy, but I also loved being loved so unconditionally. Some of my fellow trainers would tease me about how attached she was to me. They were concerned not only for Lucy, but for me. She would have to leave me once training was over and she was adopted. It would be difficult for us both. Each time I would look at her, I knew it, but I always asked myself, "What else can I do but keep loving her?" It was not as if I could start being mean to her so she would not love me!

I spent many hours with Lucy. We trained, hung out together, and I loved Lucy as much as she obsessively loved me. She was smart and learned everything that I trained her to do. When training, if I asked her to do things more than once, her intelligent eyes would direct a humorous glance at me, as if she raised an eyebrow saying, "Excuse me?" I would catch myself talking to her; just rambling on about whatever was on my mind while we walked or relaxed in the cell. It was as if Lucy enjoyed our conversations, it was like she understood what I was saying to her. While talking to her she would tilt her cute little head to the side and I could not help but wonder if she really knew what I was saying! As the weeks went by, Lucy stole a piece of my heart and soul. She reminded me that it was okay to feel, and to love. I forgot about being in prison and stopped caring about the mask that I had put on for so many years. I was just a man that loved an amazing dog that loved me back. I was normal and I found that not only was I saving Lucy from being sent to a shelter, she was saving me from my own corrosive discontent. Lucy loved me and changed my life forever. She reminded me, with a lick to the face, that I have changed and I could do something positive with my life. I could help her and other dogs like her.

I knew coming into the Paws for Life program, that I would be saving dogs. What I did not realize is that the dogs would be saving us as well. I remember Alex Tonner talking to me for the very first time. She walks up to Lucy and me, and ask how Lucy is as she kneels and pets her. I watch her petting Lucy and answer all of her questions, and smile inwardly because she is so comfortable with Lucy. It is clear that she knows all about Lucy and it felt wonderful to know that other people care just as much for Lucy as I do. I knew that I was a part of something very special. I was helping people like Alex save animals. Like most of the people, I just wanted to be around dogs. This new insight deepened my appreciation for the program. I was helping save the lives of dogs.

A nice woman who works at the prison soon adopted Lucy. She loves and adores Lucy, just as we thought and hoped. Now Lucy is obsessed with her new family. I have heard a few stories about her that have affected me deeply. I am proud of her and the life she now has. I am also proud of myself. When it was time for Lucy to go to her new family, I didn't care that people were seeing me cry as I hugged her good bye. I stood there with tears running down my face and I smiled as I thought about the wonderful home that she was going to be living in. I looked around and saw my PFL brothers standing by me and nobody cared that I was crying. They felt the same way that I was feeling. We all love dogs and when watch them leave it is the hardest thing that we go through. Lucy is happy now and I helped make that possible.

It is August 7, 2017. My friend, my Mentor, and PFL Brother Jon Grobman is giving me advice before I go into a commutation interview, "Be honest, hold nothing back, you got this." They are the same words of advice I received from another friend Kenneth Hartman, who had recently had his term of LWOP, commuted. He would be going to this Parole Hearing some day soon. He would then be going home, finally after 38 years! I walked out of the building and headed towards the Program Office to meet the man who had been sent by order of the Governor's office to interview me for possible commutation. My heart was beating faster than I can ever remember! I can not help but think back to how this all started months ago when a man named Scott Budnick from A.R.C. (Anti Recidivism Coalition) came in with Rapper/Movie star "Common" to talk to men in the PFL program on the PPF yard. While most men were talking to Common, a few of us were off to the side with our dogs. Scott came over to say hi, I did not know Scott personally but I knew about all of the hard work he had personally done, as well as A.R.C., in changing the laws for juveniles and others. I thanked him for all of his hard work and he asked if any of those laws had affected me. I told him no; I have LWOP. Scott gave me a hug, like Scott always does, and then he told us, "all of you that have LWOP need to submit a request for Commutation to Governor Jerry Brown. The Governor is going to be doing big things before he leaves office." I smiled remembering what he said to us and how I did not really believe it would happen.

At my commutation interview, I knew that he was a true professional. He knew what he was about and he understood the gravity of what he was there to do. We discussed my crime, my childhood, my time in prison, to the self-help classes I had taken and of course, Paws for Life. The interview went on for three hours. I knew that this was it, this was going to be my one and only

chance. So I let it all out, all my truths, and everything that I was, out on the table that day. When I was done, I walked out of the room feeling lighter than I have ever felt before. I had discussed things from my life that I had never admitted to anyone, at times not even to myself. I understood why all those questions had to be asked. They needed to understand how I became a person who committed murder, what happened to me in my past, that led me to murder another man; take away his life, take him from his family, friends, and his community? What happened to me so that I could do something so horrific? You see, If nothing happened to me and I committed my crime “just because” then I would be a sociopath, and should never be let out. I am not a sociopath, so I told them the truth. I not only told the truth, but I was able to show the interviewer that I understood what had happened to me in the past; that I could connect all of the dots that led me to commit my crime.

It is August 17, 2018 and I am sitting a few feet from where I had been sitting when Scott had come in and talked to us. I am talking with my friend and PFL Brother about how men had been called to the Program Office where they had met with the Warden, talked to someone at the Governor’s Office, and had their terms commuted. Then, all of the sudden, my name is called over the loud speaker, asking me to report to the Program Office. The packed day room erupts in cheers as my PFL Brothers crowd around me. The hours that followed were the most amazing in my life. When I walked back to the building, after receiving the commutation, I noticed that every single one of my PFL brothers were standing there waiting for me. They all asked, “did you get it?” I raised my arms up in victory, the whole building erupts in screams, and they are all clapping for me. My new PFL family is happy for me. Men who were also fighting back sadness because they had NOT been called, had set aside their sadness to rejoice in my happiness. I felt so loved that it still overwhelms me to this day.

It is 4/4/19. I am Co-Leader of a program that has become a part of who I am. A program that has not only changed my life but without a doubt was one of the main reasons why I will be going home one day. My Commutation papers are clear; it starts with my participation in the PFL program. It quotes from a support letter written by Alex Tonner, the Founder of PFL. It quotes from a support letter written from Professor Bidham Roy of CAL State Los Angeles, whom I met because of his support for PFL. It then quotes from a letter from the Warden of the prison who I had met during the Paws for Life graduation.

I smile while I think about how this program has grown and how I have grown with it. We now have more than 90 men in the Paws for Life K9 Rescue Program. There is no program like this one anywhere in the State, maybe even the Country. Each man in the program is unique and special. They work a minimum of 3 hours a day with their dogs, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Training the dogs, attending training meetings, and taking care of the dogs. We have 28 dogs as of today. We should have up to 45 dogs by the end of the summer. We are training the newer guys on what to do and how to do it. Not only that, but most of us in the Program are attending self-help classes or attending college. Some are doing both. That is on top of having a full-time job. All of us in the program have moved past prison politics as Jon taught all of us; that there is no race in PFL, only the dogs we love and our PFL brothers. We do this day in and day out, because we love what we are doing. We are doing this because it is the right thing to do and it feels right. The pride I feel being a part of such an amazing program is like nothing I have ever felt before. When I watch all of these men working so hard to help these amazing dogs, I smile as I watch all these men change into "real humans", I feel so proud. We stopped caring about what so many of us have been told about what it takes to be a "real man". We have become ourselves. We walk around acting goofy with all types of dogs, big dogs, little dogs, mean looking dogs, funny looking dogs, and of course our favorite bright White Poodle! We could care less about who sees us or judges us. We show the world we live in (a maximum-security prison yard) that we love our dogs and we are not ashamed of it or feel like we are less manly. What matters is our dogs and our Paws for Life Family.

Then there is the guilt that I feel for getting a commutation. This overwhelming and completely suffocating guilt that I feel at times when I look at so many of my PFL Brothers; I will get to go home someday and they might still be here. Governor Jerry Brown blessed me in a way that is beyond words. I lived without hope or even a dream of going home and the Governor gave me a chance at freedom. I will go home someday, of that I am sure of and that is why I feel so guilty. I look at Marcus McJimpson, Allen Burnett, Ed Dwayne Smith, Aris Karimalis, Mike Dally, Christopher Mann, Chris Murray, Kenneth Smith, Dara Cha Yin, Jeff Hunter, and Duncan Martinez, just to name a few. I cannot help but wonder, "Why me? Why me and not them, why not all of us?"

Sometimes I wonder at the change I feel in myself and I see my PFL Brothers. I understand it even when most others do not. You see, most people in prison come in broken. Men and women, it is all the same. We all lived through things that broke us. As I have said, I had to go through some of the things that led me to become someone who could commit such a horrific crime. I am not alone. It is the same for almost every single one of us. So why the change from a Dog Program? The answer is unconditional love. Most of us felt unwanted and unloved. That is hard for adults, but devastating for a child. Then the Dog Program comes along and touches us in ways we never thought possible

The love of a dog is blind to the events of our past. The love of a dog is unconditional. I have sat on the floor while a dog licked my face as I cried like a child. I am not alone. Most of the men joined the program to be around dogs, but then they are assigned to a dog to care for, train, and spend time with. They grow to love these dogs and they form a special bond with them. Most of these dogs were horribly abused before they came into the program. When they arrive here they find love and patience. The heart of a dog is enormous and they open their hearts to us and give us what we always wanted in life, unconditional love. That love opens up our own hearts to a family of other men who have found that this is where we will have a family to love and support us. It all starts with "The Incredible Power of Dogs."

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